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AUTHOR Kerka, Sandra
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ABSTRACT

In one school of thought, self-directed learning (SDL) is based in the autonomous, independent individual who chooses to undertake learning for personal growth. However, another school of thought stresses the social construction of knowledge and the social context of learning. Some writers challenge the exclusive emphasis on the autonomous self when discussing SDL and call for wider recognition of the interdependent and collaborative aspects of SDL. Several researchers have identified promotion of emancipatory learning and social action as a goal of SDL. However, serious obstacles to realization of SDL's emancipatory potential exist. Included among them are organizational cultures that limit learner control over the environment and the often-limited access of marginalized or low-income groups to the Internet. The speed of information proliferation and the complexities of new social networks and workplace transformation will make SDL abilities imperative. It is possible that upcoming generations, especially those for whom the Web is becoming a natural habitat, are adapting to change by developing an SDL orientation. Whether SDL is individual or collective, emancipatory or oppressive, inevitable or not, the biggest misconception may be in trying to capture the essence of SDL in a single definition. (Contains 18 references.) (MN)

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Sandra Kerka

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka

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Self-Directed Learning

For several decades, self-directed learning (SDL) has been a major focus of adult education (Merriam and Caffarella 1999), although the notion of its centrality in adult learning tends to be assumed without question (Rowland and Volet 1996, p. 90). Controversies and misconceptions about the definition and dimensions of SDL continue to arise. Updating an earlier look at SDL (Kerka 1994), this publication examines its myths and realities from other perspectives.

Individual or Collective?

In one school of thought, SDL is based in the autonomous, independent individual who chooses to undertake learning for personal growth (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Braman's (1998) review of literature suggests that the SDL construct has been primarily based in individualistic attitudes and values, in keeping with the viewpoint that lifelong learning has primarily instrumental objectives related to individual responsibility and work force development. However, another school of thought stresses the social construction of knowledge and the social context of learning. One of Brookfield's criticisms of SDL research (cited in Long 1994) was that it ignored social context by focusing on the individual, isolated learner, although Long refutes Brookfield's criticism in an analysis of more than 500 studies, as much as 90% of which were concerned with SDL in social settings. Maehl (2000) asks, "Is self-directed learning possible if knowledge is socially or culturally constructed?" (p. 51).

Braman (1998) found a significant relationship between readiness for self-directed learning and individualism. The goals of an individual and his/her cultural group may conflict, thus hindering the opportunity for self-direction. He argues that more research examining SDL from cross-cultural perspectives is needed. In their study of SDL in community learning centers, Rowland and Volet (1996) also call for more awareness of sociocultural perspectives. They suggest that a more postmodern view of the *self* in self-directed learning challenges the notion of universal individualism and that, from this perspective, adult learning has significance "for a learner's community as well as for the individual" (p. 100).

No one may be completely autonomous all of the time and in all situations, and some writers challenge the exclusive emphasis on the autonomous self (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). They call for wider recognition of the interdependent and collaborative aspects of SDL. Matuszowicz (1996) provides one example of this in his work focused on developing self-direction in homeless adults. For perhaps the first time in their lives, this group recognized themselves and others as learning resources and learned through the practice of interpersonal behaviors and skills such as giving and receiving feedback. Similarly, in British open learning centers, O'Mahony and Moss (1996) found that adult basic education students "identified a common bond and developed a *collective* self-direction" (p. 30) through work on a student committee; they also enhanced their sense of individual self-direction. A study of empowerment in community groups (Singh 1993) suggests that group learning processes can empower individuals to move from low to high self-directedness. In addition, the enhancement of individual SDL abilities tended to help groups become more empowering.

Perhaps O'Donnell (1999) goes the furthest in emphasizing the collective over individual dimension when he presents a rationale for what he calls "selves-directed learning" (p. 251). Such communal learning is based on Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, part of which includes the process of reaching understanding through the cooperative negotiation of common definitions of a situation.

Is Self-Directed Learning Emancipatory?

O'Donnell's critical theory of selves-directed learning has as its purpose "the emancipation of individuals from domination and exploitation" (p. 251). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) also identify as one goal of SDL the promotion of emancipatory learning and social action. If SDL is intrinsically about self-determination, it should consequently have emancipatory potential. Or does it serve to "accommodate learners to prevailing social and political beliefs while conveying an illusion of individual control!" (Maehl 2000, p. 51).

Building on the liberatory approaches of Paulo Freire, O'Mahony and Moss (1996) note that SDL can be used just as any other approach to deliver a traditional curriculum or dominant ideology. SDL and lifelong learning have become part of mainstream rhetoric as key components of global competitiveness and economic development. Democratic participation and social action are not necessarily the goals of this type of self-directed learning.

According to Vann (1996), there are studies that suggest self-direction is an orientation learned through socialization. Percival (1996) takes exception to this characterization; she distinguishes between learning as a social activity (the constructivist view) and as a socialized, conditioned response (the behaviorist view), noting the oppressive potential of behaviorism.

Of all the models of SDL they reviewed, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) find that Hammond and Collins' model is the only one that "explicitly addresses the goal of promoting emancipatory learning and social action as a central tenet of self-directed learning" (p. 304). In Hammond and Collins' model, learners critically examine the social, political, and environmental contexts that affect their learning and they develop both personal and social learning goals. However, Merriam and Caffarella found no studies using this model as a conceptual framework.

In order for self-directed learning to achieve its emancipatory potential, "certain political conditions must be in place" (Brookfield 1993, p. 227). Organizational culture may limit learner control over the educational environment. Marginalized or low-income groups may have limited access to learning resources (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Gray (1999) proposes that the Internet may be "one of the most powerful and important self-directed learning tools in existence" (p. 120). The Internet does have the liberating *potential* to deliver new modes of learning; overcome resource, time, and place barriers; and equalize learning opportunities. However, gender and income imbalances still exist among users, vested interests may act to exert control over what is transmitted and who has access to it, and instructional deficiencies in online learning have yet to be adequately addressed (ibid.).

Is SDL the Wave of the Future?

Gray's technological utopia may be a glimmer on the horizon. According to another visionary, Malcolm Knowles, "by 2020 all learning–from elementary school through postgraduate education–will

be based on the principles of self-directed learning" (Hatchet 1997, p. 37). How close is this vision to becoming a reality?

Even as more learning shifts to electronic media, Gray (1999) thinks it likely that forms of teacher control will still persist. "Even seemingly democratic interactive facilities such as e-mail forums" are often dominated by teachers rather than students (p. 122). Although the Web has been promoted as accommodating different learning styles (Kerka 1998), hypertext does not suit all types of learners.

Gray (1999) cites a study of Swedish adults showing that the greatest gains from SDL were made by those from the upper classes. Will other socioeconomic groups achieve greater self-direction through the use of information technology, or will IT perpetuate the inequities?

Supporting Knowles' contention is Bedard's (1997) assertion that "new social realities will force the next century to become a 'learning century'" (p. 288). Bedard believes that more and more learning will take place outside of traditional teacher-student interactions. The speed of information proliferation and the complexities of new social networks and workplace transformations will make self-directed learning abilities imperative.

It is also possible that upcoming generations, especially those for whom the Web is becoming a natural habitat, are adapting to change by developing a self-directed learning orientation. Confessore and Barron (1997) studied the learning orientations of "preboomers" (49 and over), "boomers" (30-49), and "postboomers" (under 30). The three age groups had significantly different learning orientations. Confessore and Barron question whether this is a function of the general life experiences of each cohort or whether the orientations will change as they move through life stages. Nevertheless, they conclude that institutions will have to accommodate an evolving spectrum of learning orientations, particularly by providing more self-directed learning opportunities.

Conclusion

Whether self-directed learning is individual or collective, emancipatory or oppressive, inevitable or not, the biggest misconception may be in trying to capture the essence of SDL in a single definition. It is clearly a multifaceted concept that should not be approached through one perspective. As Percival (1996) notes, although there may be no one correct way to look at SDL, the issues involved warrant debate because they shape educational practices. Research and practice should acknowledge both individual and collective goals for learning, ethical and political considerations, the diverse learning preferences of multicultural populations, and the effects of new technologies as the concept of self-directed learning continues to evolve.

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